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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes ideas that concern the concepts of truth and ethics in order to clarify the issues involved in education reform. Three levels exist in the idea of truth: sincerity, honesty, and the reality of persons. The reality of persons is the central idea of truth and truth at each of these levels is an issue in several ethical criteria for educational reform. There are three ethical ideas that are integrally related to the central idea of truth. These ideas involve the moral imagination, understood as the capacity to empathize with others and to discern creative possibilities for ethical action; the ethical question, stated as "What is my personal relation to what I know?"; and the public realm, or the space in which as free and equal citizens people hold one another accountable for what they know and value. The ideas are developed into a moral framework for applying truth and ethical criteria to education reform efforts. Three criteria of education reform are identified and discussed: equity, excellence, and accountability. An 11-item bibliography is included. (DB)

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TRUTH & ETHICS
In School Reform

by Thomas E. McCollough

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Truth and Ethics in School Reform

By Thomas E. McCollough

I come not to tell you pleasant things but true things.

Walt Whitman

The crisis in education is considerably deeper than we normally hear. It is a crisis in the very idea of truth. Truth today is being violated by both practice and theory.

To make a case for school reform, we will have to go to the roots of this crisis, reaching down into what can be described as a crisis of language. I am even tempted to say it is a crisis in what it means to be human.

The theme of this paper is "Truth and Ethics in School Reform." Within this context we may ask, what are the conditions necessary in order to educate children and youth to participate responsibly in those activities, practices and, above all, dispositions of mind and heart, that nourish and protect a free society? What kind of ethical outlook can we bring to bear that might enable us to clarify the issues in educational reform?

Truth today is being violated by both practice and theory.

My discussion will begin by focusing on the three levels in the idea of truth. Truth at each of these levels is an issue in several ethical criteria for educational reform.

Then I will focus on three ethical ideas that are integrally related to the central idea of truth. These ethical ideas work together to provide a coherent moral perspective on the relationship of the citizen to public life. These ideas involve: (1) the moral imagination, understood as the capacity to empathize with others and to discern creative possibilities for ethical action; (2) the ethical question, stated as "What is my personal relation to what I know?"; and (3) the public realm, or the space in which as free and equal citizens we hold one another accountable for what we know and value.

I will then develop a moral framework for applying truth and ethical criteria to education reform efforts. This schema will enable us to trace direct connections among truth, ethics, politics, research and development, and education, specifically in the classroom.

The Meaning of "Moral" and "Ethical"

As background, let me explain what I mean by the words "moral" and "ethical." Morality refers to categories of right/wrong, good/bad, true/false; the perspective from which one makes moral judgments; and the concern which leads one to press a moral inquiry. Ethics is the critical analysis of morality. It is reflection on morality with the purpose of analysis, criticism, and interpretation and justification of the rules, roles, and relations of a society.

In fact, anyone who uses the language of reform, whether researchers or Republicans, demographers or Democrats, is talking moral imperatives.

The term "educational reform" has a moral connotation and carries an implied moral imperative: Something *should* be done about the present state of education. This entails more than a social science view of education. From a strictly social science perspective, research is an end in itself. "Reform," however, calls for the application of research to bring about desired change. Educational researchers are compelled to bring to the discussion the larger dimensions of truth and ethics. In fact, anyone who uses the language of reform, whether researchers or Republicans, demographers or Democrats, is talking moral imperatives.

We also need to ask ourselves, who are the reformers and who the reformees? Is the object of reform the student, teacher, administrator, school, parent, "ordinary citizen," elected representative, president? Or are we talking about curricula, tests, institutions, and outputs? Perceptive observers and critics of school reform seem to think that education is a seamless web, a dynamic interrelated and interactive system of persons, roles, and institutions.

It is necessary to take a view of this complex enterprise that is both systemic and moral, and that does not separate fact from value. Education reform that attempts to divide fact from value will cede facts to the experts in the public realm and relegate values to the subjective private sphere. In this view, values are

equated simply with taste, preference, and opinion, an aesthetic view captured by a phrase in a recent student paper, which spoke of "a distaste for racism." Values as consumer preferences may accord with a prevailing view of the political process, but that view fatally undermines any possibility of a democratic society in which citizens take responsibility for governing themselves in accord with standards of "liberty and justice for all." Political scientists may present us with a purportedly value-free model of democracy describing how knowledge, power, and values (as interests or preferences) operate. But we need to complement that model with a model of ourselves as persons in a civil and moral community who have obligations to each other and to the truth.

In raising questions about truth and ethics, I offer no solutions to the many theoretical and practical problems in reforming schools. I do make some analytical distinctions within the central idea of truth which may help to clarify the aims and methods of educational reform.

Truth as an Ideal

The idea of truth has three levels: sincerity, honesty, and the reality of persons. It is the last category — the reality of persons — that is the central idea of truth.

Sincerity as the Most Elementary Level of Truth

Sincerity, the first level of truth, means to be true to *feelings*. Americans need no further tutoring in this, as we have been taught by the bibles of our culture to say what we feel, express ourselves, assert ourselves and, everywhere and all the time, look out for Number One. When we are true to our feelings, we are sincere. We can, of course, be sincerely vapid and sincerely obnoxious.

But this idea of truth as sincerity is pretty thin. It reduces truth to feeling, expressed as taste, preference, and opinion. A student teacher recently said to her students, "Remember, when you give your opinion, there are no right or wrong answers." No matter how much her supervising teacher tried to reason with her, the student was not persuaded to change her view. The other day some high school students said, "One opinion is

We can, of course, be sincerely vapid and sincerely obnoxious.

as good as another because opinions can't be wrong." Where did they get that? Students have been socialized into believing in a thoroughgoing relativism that leaves no basis for making judgements of value and truth.

As Professor Daniel J. Singal says in *Atlantic Monthly*, "Students come to us having sat around for 12 years expressing attitudes toward things rather than analyzing. They are always ready to tell you how they feel, but they have never learned how to construct a rational argument."

Education for making responsible judgments is woefully lacking in our public schools. Worse, the clear, often explicit, message in higher education is: This is not what we're here for. The positivism that continues to pervade social science textbooks and the individualism that remains a basic cultural assumption rob students of a moral language by limiting their expression of values to the language of emotivism. Values are seen as private expressions of individual taste, preference, and opinion when one conceives of oneself as a lone individual essentially unrelated to others.

Individualism as a mode of thought and life precludes empathy with others. It eliminates any basis for judgment and accountability to others, thereby foreclosing the possibility of constructive reform. Only a communal being, a person who recognizes the self as related to other selves in very essential ways, can speak of values with the confidence that others will acknowledge those values as standards of thought and action, or challenge them on the basis of critical analysis and evaluation. We are talking here about truth and about the conditions necessary for its public recognition.

... when interests are obscured and appeals are made to feelings, when politicians look to opinion polls to form their deepest convictions, the very aim of politics becomes confused.

The need for truth becomes apparent with respect to politics. Politics is rightly the place for expressing interests and their competition in the "play of power." But when interests are obscured and appeals are made to feelings, when politicians look to opinion polls to form their deepest convictions, the very aim of politics becomes confused. The result is symbols without substance, rhetoric without reality, negative campaigning, and character assassination. The ideal candidate is the one who, having left no tracks, is completely anonymous and who moralizes about his opponent's character rather than informing the public of his policy aims and proposals. When politics is based on feeling alone, we have candidates without a past or a

future, and no citizens concerned enough or able to hold them accountable.

Honesty: A Higher Level of Truth

At a higher level of truthfulness than sincerity is honesty. To be honest is to be true to facts. This level is evidently too lofty for 91 percent of us, who, according to a recent survey, "lie regularly." James Patterson and Peter Kim, authors of *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really Believe About Everything That Really Matters*, interviewed, in absolute privacy, 2,000 Americans across the country. They concluded, "Lying has become an integral part of the American culture. We lie, and we don't even think about it. The people we lie to most are the people closest to us."

What's going on when untruths are spoken by high public officials and no one seems to care?

What's going on when untruths are spoken by high public officials and no one seems to care?

In an article in the *New York Times*, Leslie H. Gelb says of the Thomas and Gates hearings and other recent events:

> Washington is largely indifferent to truth. Truth has been reduced to a conflict of press releases and a contest of handlers. Truth is judged not by evidence, but by theatrical performance. Truth is fear, fear of opinion polls, fear of special interests, fear of judging others for fear of being judged, fear of losing power and prestige.

Gelb concludes: "Sure, politics is the natural order of things. Yes, truth is elusive. But if a free people tolerates endless untruths, darkness descends permanently."

"... if a free people tolerates endless untruths, darkness descends permanently." Is it any coincidence that when the Czechoslovaks gained their independence and elected a new president, they chose a playwright, poet, and dissident who, when in prison because of his opposition to the old regime, had written about what it means to "live in the truth"? "There are times," says Vaclav Havel, "when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight." He continues: "In democratic societies, where the violence done to human beings is not nearly so obvious and cruel, things will

probably have to get worse there before the urgent need for that revolution is reflected in politics." Things are worse. We need basic honesty in public life in America.

Honesty will lead politicians to identify legitimate interests, to represent them honestly, and to promote them in the competitive political process. But there is yet a larger dimension of truth to which citizens must hold themselves accountable.

Truth and the Reality of Persons

"Truth" is closely related to the archaic word "troth." When persons "plight their troth," they trust, they promise, they covenant with each other. Troth — trust — truth. These words have to do with the wholeness — and holiness — of persons in relation to each other. To be truthful means to be true to the integrity of persons as whole selves; to their lives as a whole; and to their relation to society as a whole. To be true is to be faithful to the reality of persons.

To be truthful means to be true to the integrity of persons as whole selves ...

Truth that matters in our social lives and in the public realm is not truth in the abstract. It is redblooded truth, concrete and practical. Such truth has to do with how we live our lives, with the quality of our public discourse, with those conditions that hinder or foster human development, with how we treat each other, and with what we ought to try to do together in our public life. In political terms, it is truth that reflects the needs of all those in society, including those on the margins, out of sight, invisible, and helpless to exercise political power for themselves. It is public truth, as opposed to secret deals, undercover operations, and misleading reports cloaked in bureaucratic jargon. Such truth requires courageous truth-speakers, who are valued and supported by a community committed to truth.

The Ethical Dimension

Implicit in this ideal of truth is the recognition that there are ethical principles that transcend partisan interests, standards by which a democratic society governs itself justly and for the good of all. Ethical principles remain abstract and theoretical, however, unless they are acknowledged and honored by citizens. Truth as the reality of persons can be realized only by integrating its complementary dimension of ethics. This ethical dimension may be understood in terms of three ethical

components: the moral imagination, the ethical question, and the public realm.

The Exercise of Moral Imagination

The critical leap from one's own feelings to the feelings of others requires the exercise of moral imagination. Moral imagination is the capacity to empathize with others, i.e., not just to feel for oneself but to feel with and for others. This is something that education ought to cultivate and that citizens ought to bring to politics. When Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* in 1963, he described "invisible Americans" — the poor, elderly, children, mentally ill, sick, black, unemployed, Appalachian mountaineers. All of these people were out of sight and out of mind. But Harrington cared, and his book became a catalyst for the formative stages of the Great Society of the sixties.

Moral imagination is the capacity to empathize with others ...

Jonathan Kozol, in his recent book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's School,* has given us another such look at those in American society whom most of us never see. Over two years, Kozol travelled to 30 communities from Illinois to Washington, D.C., from San Antonio to New York, visiting schools and talking to children. In most of the schools he saw, not much had changed since the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* 37 years ago. Inequality and segregation were so ingrained in the system that the children and adults he spoke to never even mentioned them. Neither did any of the national reports he read.

Kozol describes the squalor of schools in East St. Louis, situated in the midst of garbage, smoke, and chemical pollution. He notes the associated problems of sickness, poverty, bad dental health, poor nutrition, and high risk of death by homicide. Then he quotes Dr. Lillian Parks, the superintendent of East St. Louis schools. "Gifted children," says Dr. Parks, "are everywhere in East St. Louis, but their gifts are lost to poverty and turmoil and the damage done by knowing they are written off by their society. Many of these children have no sense of something they belong to. They have no feeling of belonging to America."

It may be difficult in our vast, complex, impersonal society, dominated as it is by the economic (or shall we say, consumptive) imagination, to see others as *persons*. It requires moral

Students begin to make sense of their education when they assume responsibility for what they know.

imagination to respect their integrity as whole persons, with needs and wants much like our own, persons who look to the future as we do, with anxiety and hope. It requires moral imagination to give attention to their lives as a whole, lives conditioned to despair or hope by the realities of family, nutrition, and surroundings.

Reflections on the Ethical Question

It requires moral imaginatión and the ethical question to see the relation of persons to society as a whole, their role as citizens, with rights and responsibilities. We pose the ethical question as "What is my personal relation to what I know?" This re-orients ethics so that ethical reflection begins not with rational analysis of abstract principles, but with the oral knowledge of the person who is the knower. One begins with what one knows and values and holds tight the connection between one's own existence, history, values, and the public realm. Then one's responsibility for that knowledge is evident from the outset. Ethics is no longer an academic exercise but a venture in which one seeks to test one's deepest convictions in the company of others, and to test their knowledge and values in light of one's own. Ethics become a public conversation in which members of the civic community talk together in earnest about what they ought to try to do together.

Education for citizenship may be conceived in terms of the ethical question. Many students appear to be alienated from the knowledge they accumulate in their formal education. They are likely to have received the kind of education illustrated by multiple-choice tests — objective, discrete bits of information without meaningful content or evident purpose. Students begin to make sense of their education when they assume responsibility for what they know. The student's response to the ethical question, "What is my personal relation to what I know?" is the knot in the thread that enables the student to integrate and draw upon what he or she knows and values.

The ethical question also provides an essential perspective on the public realm. When public knowledge appears to be impersonal, objective, official, and secret, or simply inaccessible; when public officials speak anonymously or in bureacratese designed to forestall honest inquiry; when truth is obscured or violated, democratic society is in peril. When knowledge is

encoded in vast computerized banks and daily transactions depend upon bits of information for which no one can be held personally responsible, society becomes vulnerable to glitches, bugs, and hackers. We face new challenges as we hold ourselves and our fellow citizens responsible for public knowledge. The ethical question is the knot in the thread that keeps public life from unraveling. It prepares citizens to speak the truth in the public realm.

Truth in the Public Realm

Moral imagination and the ethical question are required to transcend contemporary culture and to create a public realm in which citizens work together for education reforms that will fully foster human development.

The public realm is more than a game of partisan politics. We used to recognize that when we referred to a politician as a "statesman." A politician can still be considered a "public servant." But it is important to distinguish between political speech and public discourse. Political language is the partisan but legitimate and appropriate means of advancing interests and values. Public language is more inclusive, for it is discourse in which as free and equal citizens, we hold each other responsible for what we know and value. It entails participation in a civil community. It assumes that participants respect the standards of truth, such as empirical evidence, sound reasoning, openness, attentiveness, respect for others, honesty, objectivity, and the capacity for self-criticism. These are ideals, to be sure; but ideals which cannot be continually flouted without consequences.

Truth in the public realm is the final test of leadership in a free society.

Truth in the public realm is the final test of leadership in a free society. A recent *New York Times* article on AIDS stated that "... the White House, under pressure from conservatives, has killed two planned surveys of sexual behavior that would help tactical planning against the disease." Such actions are understandable from the political perspective; they are inexcusable from the perspective of accountability in the public realm.

In the weekly news bulletins promoting *America 2000* there is frequent reference to "bipartisan committees" to be formed at the local level. Bipartisan? Can education be partisan? So how can it be bipartisan?

We are speaking not of political education but of public education. The aims of public education must be understood in relation to the meaning of truth as the reality of persons on the one hand, and ethics in the public realm in the other. Here the moral perspective of truth and ethics emerges most clearly.

Throughout this discussion we have been thinking, of course, of children and young people in public education. To be true to the reality of persons is surely a proper aim of public education. Its realization requires a community of truth and of ethics. This idea of a moral community is implicit in the commitment to public education.

It is high time that citizens recognize the accelerating national social debt. This debt is created as we describe political, economic, and social life with purportedly value-free theoretical models and ignore the communal or moral dimension of our common life. In social terms, the national debt grows as economic models and goals and the corresponding consumptive imagination eclipse the aims of truth and value in public life and education. We begin to repay the national social debt when we resolve to speak the truth in public.

We begin to repay the national social debt when we resolve to speak the truth in public.

Truth and Ethics in School Reform Criteria

Why spend valuable time on all this when we are concerned with educational reform? The reason is that we can use these aspects of truth and ethics as a framework to discuss three criteria of education reform. These criteria are equity, excellence, and accountability.

Equity: The First Criterion for Reform

If truth is reduced to feeling (i.e., taste, preference, and opinion), equity, the first criterion for educational reform, lacks any meaningful context — so much so, in fact, that it may not even be acknowledged as a goal of educational reform. The National Study Panel on Education Indicators, which produced the report, *Education Counts*, for the Acting Commissioner of Education Statistics in September 1991 declares equity to be one of this society's most important values. However, it goes on to say that "none of the six national goals (of *America 2000*) focuses exclusively on it." The panel rightly believes that this

issue needs highlighting to signal the seriousness of this nation's commitment to equity in American education.

Moreover, unless one can transcend one's own immediate feeling and experience, one will neither care nor have the capacity to reason about equity. Equity requires moral imagination.

A moral imagination attentive to the needs of children requires a supportive ethos, a community of people who hold themselves accountable to certain standards and to each other. This ethos is a moral precondition of education. It is sometimes reflected in public policy when members of national commissions have observed firsthand the realities of children in poverty. There is a notable instance of this in the recent report of the National Commission on Children, *Beyond Rhetoric: New American Agenda for Children and Families*. The report presents a communal perspective and endorses policies such as the Claude Pepper Young Americans Act of 1990 that authorizes grants to states "for the development of coordinated, collaborative systems for the delivery of health and social services to children and their families." The panel declares:

A moral imagination attentive to the needs of children requires a supportive ethos ...

> As a nation, we can no longer afford to rely exclusively or primarily upon autonomous, narrowly defined programs to meet the complex and interrelated needs of troubled families. We cannot tolerate a situation in which families needing assistance slip into crisis because they are unable to secure help in a timely fashion. Nor can we countenance a system that discourages this country's best and brightest citizens from devoting their skills and expertise to the service of children and families.

Excellence: The Second Criterion for Reform

The ethical question, understood as "What is my personal relation to what I know?", bears directly on the second criterion of educational reform, excellence. Excellence as an educational criterion cannot be limited to testing outcomes by standardized, quantifiable measures. It must be applied to the quality of the process of learning itself. What is the essence of the educational process but the broadening and deepening of understanding and responsibility?

An ethical view of excellence will be concerned not just with quantitative measurement of learner outcomes, but with qualitative assessment of the learner's knowledge. According to *Education Counts*, a most innovative means of qualitative assessment of the learner's knowledge is proposed by the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. Researchers at this center propose a national examination system that incorporates student projects, along with performance examinations, and portfolios. Such projects, for example, would give students an opportunity to demonstrate what they know (often in teams) in the context of solving a complex problem over a period of time. The report goes on:

> All of these modes of assessment would stress the application of knowledge and skill in real life situations, situations in which there is rarely only one right answer to a problem and in which much of the art of solving the problems lies in framing it well.

The Special Study Panel on Education Indicators recognizes this kind of excellence. The panel defines appropriate learner outcomes as command of core content, integrative reasoning, and attitudes and dispositions. While core content has to do with the facts and knowledge grounded in traditional subject matter, the critical component of integrative reasoning is "the faculty of integration, the ability to reason about, and apply insight to, complex issues, drawing on knowledge from distinct areas of core content. Attitudes and dispositions have to do with honesty, tolerance, a sense of community, self-directed teamwork, and cooperative learning."

Such a view of excellence is concerned not just with education as a means to economic ends but with the more encompassing ends of a human life. Education will, therefore, be geared not to economic goals and short term political interest but to broad and long term values.

If truth is conceived simply as being true to facts, education will be confined to passive learning, training, rote memory, and performance.

Truth is also essential to excellence. If truth is conceived simply as being true to facts, education will be confined to passive learning, training, rote memory, and performance.

If we do not see truth as essential to education, politics and public life, it will be necessary to couch all talk of educational ends and means in economic terms and to reduce all criteria of learning to quantifiable measures of "performance." The aim

of education will be the production of outputs, measured by whether they provide the economic units required for successful competition with other leading industrial nations. "Excellence" will mean "most efficient."

Without truth, the researcher's concern will be limited to the "validity" of results, not with their meaning or application. Similarly, under such conditions, the researcher will perceive no personal responsibility for promoting the truth of the research in the political arena.

The researcher's larger responsibility is grounded in a deeper understanding of knowledge. Consider the prevailing but problematic notion of knowledge as impersonal, objective, and wholly explicit. Such a notion posits that knowledge is possible without a knower. It accords easily with the kind of knowledge that is being encoded in computer banks and which grows, and spreads, and encroaches on our private lives, even as it becomes more anonymous and elusive. The greater the amount of knowledge about private citizens accumulates in the files of government and companies, the less citizens retain access to and control of that knowledge. However, knowledge is hardly the right word — it is information we are really talking about here, encoded in bits and pieces, just as more and more media reduce knowledge to information conveyed in brief and fleeting sound bites.

Without truth, the researcher's concern will be limited to the "validity" of results, not with their meaning or application.

Accountability: The Third Criterion for Reform

Truth as the reality of persons and the ethical idea of the public realm bears directly on the third criterion of educational reform, accountability. Increasingly in the wake of the 1980s educational reform movement, corporate leaders and state lawmakers are crying out for accountability. Political pressures for greater accountability have resulted in the growing use of standardized tests to measure school progress. However, says Thomas Toch, "the new tests are failing the excellence movement in two crucial ways. They are falling far short as reliable measures of public education's performance. And they are undercutting the reform movement's academic aims."

The Special Study Panel on Education Indicators recognized the limited accountability in the nation's educational goals and in the *America 2000* strategy. It warns that ignoring educational

complexities and narrowly defining an educational agenda could focus attention on the wrong issues.

The panel declares:

> After more than a year of study and reflection, the panel concludes that a very different concept of indicators is required in American education. Education indicators should be developed to provide information for all parties with a stake in the education discussion — teachers, parents, administrators, employers, and policymakers. The panel, therefore, argues for a far more comprehensive array of indicators than is contemplated by most of the indicator development activities now underway.

These indicators of educational excellence represent a less political and more ethical view of accountability. Their aims are likely to be realized in schools that are designed according to human scale, such as some of the small school settings that Toch describes. In such schools, teachers and students relate to each other in terms of mutual responsibility, caring, and loyalty — all qualities of a moral community. As the educator David S. Seeley says, "Loyalty provides a different kind of accountability from the political/bureaucratic accountability upon which we mostly now rely in public education. It is the direct, face-to-face accountability of people working together on shared goals."

The "public" is conversation about what matters most in the sphere of our life together.

This kind of ethical accountability will best prepare young people for the responsibilities of public life. The public realm includes the "political" but it represents an ethical idea, an ideal, a vision, a moral imperative. The public realm is not a thing. Political scientists can't give a scientific description of it. It must always and continually be created by those who act on what they know, counting on their fellow citizens to listen and speak, criticize and evaluate, exercise judgement, decide, and act. The "public" is conversation about what matters most in the sphere of our life together. It is an ideal for which as citizens we are all responsible.

A Vision Grounded in Truth

What we need most of all today is a vision. The President has confessed that he has a problem with "the vision thing." But once before in this century, in the early, terrible days of the Great Depression, another President spoke of vision. In his inaugural address, he quoted the ancient book of Proverbs: "Without a vision, the people perish." It was this vision, as much as the New Deal itself, that sustained a people during those times of economic hardship, engendered a sense of moral community, and gave a nation hope.

Hope for the public realm rests in the community of truth.

Since there is a rather gloomy background to our reflections on truth in the public realm, I want to confess that I can think and say these things only in the context of a moral vision. Hope for the public realm rests in the community of truth. While we may be pessimistic in the face of some disturbing features of our public life, we have reason to be hopeful as long as we acknowledge ourselves members of a community of truth. To understand ourselves in this way is not to claim a privileged status, but to confess that we are accountable to each other and to the truth.

We need vision today for school reform. We look to this community of truth within "the federal R&D system" for an understanding of school reform grounded in truth. May you stand by truth in our public educational system, in the political arena, and in the public realm.

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